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# NATHANIEL MACON.

AN ADDRESS

BY

THOMAS M. PITTMAN, Esq.,

On occasion of the Unveiling of a Monument to  
Mr. Macon, at Guilford Battle Ground,  
July 4th, 1902.

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About us on every hand is peace. But the occasion, this place, these monuments speak of war—a war patriotic in its beginning, glorious in its conduct, far-reaching in its consequences, which ended the sovereignty of the king and ushered in the sovereignty of the people and in which a loyal colony was transformed into the free State of North Carolina. The privations and dangers of war gave way to the cares and perplexities of civil life under new and untried conditions. The foundations of government had been well laid in constitutions for which existed no precedents of form or interpretation, but the details and policies of both State and National Governments were literally to be spelled out under circumstances demanding almost infinite patience and courage. It was inevitable that differences should result in opposing parties. Visions of empire, of wealth and position fixed the fancy of some on a government of power and dignity, which should be made great by the control and direction of the great and wealthy few. To these constitutions were but shackles that impeded the progress of brilliant policies and to be got rid of as far as possible, if not by repeal, then by a broadness of interpretation which should make all things possible.

Others saw visions of manhood—self-governing, exalted and dignified. To these constitutions were the safeguards of liberty—as the strong walls of a city shut-

ting out foes which threaten its safety. One saw the splendor and luxury of the few, the other saw the dignity, safety, and the prosperity of the many. So much being understood an insight is possible into the life of the man whose memory we honor today.

Nathaniel Macon was born in Granville county, now Warren, December 17, 1757. His father was Gideon Macon, a native of Virginia, descended from the Huguenot Gideon Macon, who settled in that State some time prior to 1682. Martha, a daughter of this first Gideon, married Orlando Jones and was grandmother of Martha Custis, the wife of George Washington. His mother was Priscilla Jones, daughter of Edmund Jones, of Shocco, and Abigail (Sugan) Jones, reputed the first white woman to cross Shocco creek into the up country.

Nathaniel was one of the younger, possibly the youngest, of eight children. His father died when he was about five years old. His mother subsequently married James Ransom and from that marriage sprung Gen. Robert Ransom and his distinguished brother Matt. W. Ransom. At an early age Nathaniel gave such promise of those strong moral and intellectual qualities which distinguished his mature years that, notwithstanding the moderate means of the family, it was determined to give him a collegiate education. The few classical schools then in the State were conducted chiefly by Presbyterian ministers who were educated at Princeton college—then as now an institution of very high rank. Through the influence of these teachers it contributed more than any similar institution to higher education in North Carolina. The fact that young Macon was sent to that college indicates the influence of some one of those teachers, most likely Rev. Henry Patillo, who taught in Orange and later in Granville, and was chairman of the Committee

Oct. 10, 1884



of Safety of Bute county from its organization. His reputation as a teacher was excellent and specimens of his handwriting, now in my possession, indicate that he was a man of culture. I have not been able to learn when Mr. Macon entered college, but it was probably about 1775. In 1776 when he was not yet eighteen years of age, his studies were interrupted for a short tour of military service on the Delaware, after which he returned to his classes. The gifted and patriotic Dr. Witherspoon was then President of Princeton and the value of his influence upon the life of the young man can not now be measured.

Of young Macon at this time his friend and biographer Hon. Weldon N. Edwards, writes: "His own inclinations eagerly seconded the hopeful purpose of his friends. While there he prosecuted his studies with fond diligence and sought all the avenues to useful knowledge with unflagging zeal. Nor did he relax his efforts in this respect after his return home, devoting to such books as were within his reach all the time he could spare from the ordinary duties of life. \* \* \* In the latter part of his life he was often heard to say that his eyesight failed him sooner than it otherwise would have done in consequence of his reading so much by firelight in his youth and early manhood—being then too poor to buy candles—his small patrimony having been exhausted during his minority in his support and education."

In 1779, when the war clouds had descended upon the South, he laid aside his studies at college and hastening home enlisted as a private in a company of which his brother John was captain. He continued in the service as a private, except as interrupted by legislative duties until provisional articles of peace were signed in November, 1782, and "though commands and places of trust and confidence, as well as of ease and safety were often

tendered him, he invariably declined them;" nor would he ever accept a cent of pay for his service. When the war was over and provision was being made for the soldiers of the revolution, he declared that "no state of fortune could induce him to accept it." His was a knightly spirit freed from the license and extravagance of knighthood. He served from the love of serving and when the frosts of many winters had crowned his head, the State was still to him "Our beloved mother North Carolina.

While in the army and scarcely yet twenty-three years of age, he was elected the first Senator from Warren county to the General Assembly of North Carolina. It is said that his first intimation of the election was a summons from the Governor to attend a session of the Assembly, and that he would have declined the honor but for Gen. Greene, who heard of his purpose and persuaded him that he could be of greater service to the army in the State Senate than as a private in the ranks. It was during the time of the famous retreat from South Carolina, which led to the battle of Guilford Court House and the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. The American army had just crossed the Yadkin and was taking a short and much needed rest on its northern side while the British pursuit was delayed by a flood in the river. Mr. Macon's refusal to obey the Governor's summons was talked about the camp until it came to the knowledge of Gen. Greene, who was deeply impressed by such a preference. The army was in a destitute condition and the outlook gloomy. The General sent for the young man and asked an explanation of his strange conduct. Macon replied "that he had seen the *faces* of the British many times, but had never seen their *backs*, and he meant to stay in the army till he did." General Greene knew men and quickly realized that one stood

before him through whom the army might be equipped for the great emergency that was upon it. Under these circumstances Mr. Macon was persuaded to enter the Senate. He did not disappoint his General's expectations. Largely through his efforts the pressing necessities of the army were supplied. The Battle of Guilford Court House was made possible, from which British dominion over the colonies went down in the gloom of defeat at Yorktown.

He was Senator five terms, beginning in 1781. His recognition was prompt and the records of the Senate show that he was one of the most industrious and influential members. His strict regard for the law was as manifest here as in his later life. Certain goods had been impressed from merchants in Edenton for the use of the army. It was the occasion of a petition to the Assembly. Mr. Macon, chairman of the joint committee to consider the matter, reported: "It is your committee's opinion that the impressment of goods by general warrants is unconstitutional, oppressive and destructive of trade." Forty years later he wrote to his friend, Bartlett Yancey: "The book of Judges ought to be attentively read by every man in the United States to see the terrible effect on the Israelites for departing from the law which was their constitution; and so ought the books of Samuel and Kings; indeed the whole Bible contains great knowledge of the principles of government. ✓ The rising generations forget the principles and maxims of their forefathers, hence the destruction of free government in every age. Of what benefit was the law to the children of Israel when they departed from it, or what benefit are written constitutions if they be departed from; the wise maxims they may contain are useless, perhaps worse than useless if not adhered to, because honest people abide by them, and others do not."

He married Hannah Plummer October 9, 1783. The marriage was a most happy one but of short duration. She died January 11, 1790, leaving a son, who died in his seventh year, and two daughters, Betsy K., who married Wm. Martin, of Granville, and Seigniora, who married Wm. Eaton, Sr., of Warren. He never married again

Mr. Macon established his home on Buck Spring plantation, some ten miles northeast of Warrenton. Here died and were buried the wife and son, and here were spent the long years which grew into lonely old age. In a splendid grove of many hundred oaks he built a plain dwelling of poplar plank. One room sixteen feet square, a half story above and a basement below, was this mansion. It was in keeping with his slender means at the outset of life, and wholly sufficient for the simple tastes of the lonely man when the light of his life had gone out. Offices such as were common in that section were placed about the grove for the accommodation of guests. The old time kitchen with its great fire place, in which I have stood fully erect, was nearly in front of the dwelling and close by. As usual in old places in that country, the barns and stables were first reached in approaching the house. The great spring from which the place derived its name was in a well stocked deer park. Mr. Macon took much pleasure in sport and disposed of his deer by will. In December 1824, when sixty-seven years of age, he wrote Mr. Yancey from Washington, "I caught twelve foxes before I left home; ate of the venison of five wild deer," etc.

I visited the old home in 1898, in company with Dr. Francis A. Macon, and obtained photographs of some of the most interesting objects. Some five hundred oaks of the old grove remained. The dwelling, kitchen, some

old barns and servant houses were then standing. A friend in Warren county writes me: "I would lay emphasis upon his unfailing honesty, the intimate, friendly and social relations he maintained with his neighbors, his faithful attendance upon the little country church, his interest in the young." These were characteristics of his home life and greatly endeared him to his neighbors, by whom he was known as Mr. Meekins. This pronunciation of his name was insisted upon by Mr. Macon himself but was not so much relished by his grandchildren. One of these, by way of protest, offered his grandfather some bacon at dinner on one occasion, calling it "beekins," and justified himself by the argument that if M-a-c-o-n spelled "Meekins," b-a-c-o-n spelled "beekins." We are not told that the argument was convincing.

A short time after his wife's death Mr. Macon entered upon that public service in which he was to win enduring fame, and a larger measure of affectionate regard than falls to the lot of most public men. At the opening of the first session of the Second Congress, on October 28, 1791, he took his seat as a member from the Warren district. At that time the Federalists were in power and already committed to the open door theory of constitutional interpretation and to the doctrine of implied powers. Against these Mr. Macon was unalterably set. The gentle Huguenot blood on the one side with traditions of kingly falsehood and oppression; the hardy pioneer strain on the other, with its records of hardships and dangers overcome, were a heritage of preparation for a life cast in heroic mould. In 1764 that portion of Granville in which he lived had been cut off and erected into the county of Butte. Here his boyhood witnessed the agitation which preceded the revolution.



Almost from his very door went the "Serious address to the inhabitants of Granville." Only a little way off at Hillsboro were the stirring events of the Regulation. From his own, Bute, by the hand of Thomas Person, went the petition of his kinsmen and neighbors. When, after years at the feet of Witherspoon where enthusiasm was tempered by knowledge, he returned to join in the struggle of his kinsmen for liberty, in the county of Bute where there "were no Tories," he found at the head of the Committee of Safety his old preceptor, Patillo, and associated with him the men of his own family—Ransom, Alston, Hawkins, Greene, Seawell, Johnston and Jones. About him were men who had conquered stream and mountain and forest, who had established homes of virtue and industry and thrift, who, in the Colonial Assemblies, had proved themselves the equals of the English governors sent to rule over them, and who, upon this sacred ground and a hundred other battle-fields had shown their manhood in the face of the best soldiers of Europe. Could a man born and reared under such circumstances and among such men doubt their capacity for self-government or look with any degree of patience upon the acquisition of power by trickery in the interpretation of the Constitution? Not Macon, at any rate.

As a member of the minority, Mr. Macon had little opportunity to promote any important legislation in Congress, but here, as in the State Legislature, he received early recognition. His course was marked by sound judgment and industry, and by a strict adherence to the Constitution. His first real opportunity came in the great political contest of 1799-1800, which ended in the final defeat of the Federalist party. Judge Story in his notable address on Marshall gives this account of that struggle: "The session of Congress in the winter

of 1799 and 1800 will be forever memorable in our political annals. It was the moment of the final struggle for power between the two great political parties, which then divided the country, and ended, as is well known, in the overthrow of the Federal administration. Men of the highest talents and influence were there assembled and arrayed in hostility to each other; and were excited by all the strongest motives which can rouse the human mind, the pride of power, the hope of victory, the sense of responsibility, the devotion to principles deemed vital, and the bonds of long political attachment and action. Under such circumstances (as might naturally be expected) every important measure of the administration was assailed with a bold and vehement criticism, and was defended with untiring zeal and firmness. No man came out of this struggle with more distinction than Mr. Macon. It left him the recognized leader of his party in the House of Representatives and Speaker. He held this position during three terms with entire independence, and yet with satisfaction to all parties. His sickness and absence from place prevented his further election.

It is impossible in a short address to discuss Mr. Macon's Congressional career in detail. He was attentive and prompt in meeting every duty. We may note a few instances of the part he played and the views he expressed:

The depredations upon our commerce, growing out of the war between Great Britain and France, caused much irritation in the United States. Various expedients were proposed to meet the situation, such as new treaties and the embargo act. Mr. Macon was solicitous to pursue a course which might bring relief and yet avoid war. He said:

“This nation, in my opinion, must take her choice of

two alternatives: to be happy and contented without war and without internal taxes, or to be warlike and glorious, abounding with what is called honor and dignity, or in other words taxes and blood. If it be the first the people will continue to enjoy that which they have hitherto enjoyed—more privileges than have fallen to the lot of any nation with whose history we are acquainted; they will, as they have done, live plentifully on their farms, and such as choose will carry on a fair trade by exchanging our surplus productions for such foreign articles as we may want. If we take the other ground we shall, I fear, pursue the same career, which has nearly, or quite, ruined all the nations of the globe. Look at the people of England, legally free, but half their time fighting for the honor and dignity of the crown, and the carrying trade, and see whether they have gained anything by all their battles for the nation except taxes, and these they have in greatest abundance. Look also at France before the Revolution and we shall see a people possessing a fertile country and fine climate, having the honor to fight and be taxed as much as they could bear, for the glory of the Grand Monarque. Let us turn from these two great nations, and view Switzerland, during the same period, though not powerful like the others, we shall see the people free and happy without wars, contented at home, because they have enough to live comfortably on and are not over taxed. The history of these three nations ought to convince us that public force and liberty cannot dwell in the same country."

When the interference with our commerce became intolerable under the later British Orders in Council, and the Berlin and Milan decrees of Napoleon, he became a leader in the movements for relief. As chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs he reported and secured

the passage of a bill through the House, known as Macon Bill No. 1, which was understood to have the approval of the President and Mr. Gallatin. It excluded French and English warships and merchant vessels from our ports, restricted the importation of French and English goods to vessels owned wholly by American citizens and to such as came directly from England or France. It has been characterized as the "only measure short of war which met the requirements of the case." The ground of Mr. Macon's support was that "it places restrictions on those who restrict us and not, as at present, on ourselves." This bill was defeated by a coalition of Federalists and personal enemies of Gallatin. Macon Bill No. 2, a milder measure, was then brought forward and passed, but it was not sufficient to stay the mischief, and his wise efforts to avoid war were defeated.

When peaceful measures failed to secure protection for American interests, Mr. Macon was for war; and when that was declared he gave it hearty support. Indeed he proposed to go further in strengthening the hands of the administration than the majority in Congress were willing to follow him. At the same time he declined to vote for certain measures that he thought unwise. This has occasioned a charge against him of voting for the war and then refusing to vote supplies for carrying it on. The imputation does Mr. Macon great injustice. Few men knew better than he the financial weakness of the country and its inability to indulge in reckless expenditures. The closing events of the war amply justified his course. Peace became necessary because the government was unable to maintain its credit. This necessity was so great that a treaty was negotiated and signed which did not settle nor even mention the principal matter in dispute; and that question, the right to search

vessels of another nation for subjects of the searching Power, was never settled between the United States and Great Britain until the happening of the celebrated "Trent Affair" during our Civil War.

Mr. Macon rendered great service to the country in his defense of the Constitution. In one speech he said: "There are five or six different ways found of getting power—by construction, by treaty, by implication and so forth. I am willing to execute the Constitution just as it was understood by those who made it and no other," and again, "We get power faster than the people get money." The biographer of Randolph writes: "Besides Mr. Randolph, Nathaniel Macon, of North Carolina, and Spencer Roane, Chief Justice of Virginia, were the most conspicuous statesmen in that time of amalgamation and confusion of all parties. They were ever consistent and uniform in their adherence to the principles of the strict construction school, and always urgent for those measures of economy and that course of 'wise and masterly inactivity' which must ever characterize a party based on such principles." It is at this point that men have failed to comprehend Mr. Macon. He was not what would then or now be called a progressive or constructive statesman. His idea was that the people who formed the government were entirely capable of managing it and changing it to meet their wishes when they saw fit; that the government could not enlarge its prerogative except by encroachment upon the rights of the people; that the officers of government were the servants of the people and could have no authority except as they saw fit to confer it; that the true office of government is to protect people from interference that they may work out their own lives in the strength of their own manhood. He thought the best internal improvements were boys and



girls and that people would continue to raise them if let alone. The man was absolutely and deeply sincere. When he spoke for the people, he saw before him the neighbors and the friends from whom he had come to the Congress, by whose fireside he had sat, whose hands he had held in friendly grasp and with whom he was accustomed to exchange the courtesies of good neighborhood; and he saw an ideal State, where

“Nursed by freedom, all her sons grew great,  
And every peasant was a prince in virtue.”

He wrote Bartlett Yancey in 1818: “Be not deceived, I speak soberly in the fear of God, and the love of the Constitution; let not love of improvement or a thirst for glory blind that sober discretion and sound sense with which the Lord has blessed you. Paul was not more anxious or sincere concerning Timothy than I am for you. Your error in this will injure if not destroy our beloved mother, North Carolina, and all the South country. Add not to the Constitution nor take therefrom; no incidental power can stand alone, whatever can stand alone is substantive, not incidental. Be not led astray by grand notions or magnificent opinions. Remember you belong to a meek State and just people who want nothing but to enjoy the fruits of their labor honestly and to lay out their profits in their own way. In all countries those who have sense enough to get and keep money may be safely trusted as to the manner of disbursing it.”

He was a wise and far-seeing man. Mr. Randolph declared that “if wisdom consisted in properly exercising our judgment upon the value of things desirable, Mr. Macon was certainly the wisest man he ever saw.” One or two instances will illustrate this faculty of seeing ahead

—when the craze for internal improvements sprung up he wrote a friend urging an examination of the Constitution “with the sole view to decide, whether if Congress can establish a bank or make roads and canals, whether Congress cannot also free every slave in the several states. There is no clause in the Constitution forbidding it.” This was not urged in friendship of slavery, but wholly as a constitutional question affecting important economic interests. Indeed, he had declared in Congress that “There was not a gentleman in North Carolina who did not wish that there were no blacks in the Country. It was a misfortune—he considered it as a curse; but there was no way of getting rid of them.” It may be a matter of curious interest in this connection to mention the fact, that Lewis Williams member of Congress from the Surry district, as late as 1836, voted against the admission of Arkansas as a state because its Constitution permitted slavery. I will cite only one other instance, and that outside of politics: The man who introduced supplemental reading in our schools is called the John the Baptist of Education. Yet Mr. Macon advanced the very same idea and proposed a life of Washington as the book to be used for that purpose.

Men of today do not recognize the issues involved in the Constitutional struggles of the early period. They were understood then to involve the question of popular government. Democracy was on trial. He lived to see that question settled. There were many encroachments that grieved his honest soul, but the right and capacity of the people to govern themselves was fixed. If it be true that

“They also serve who only stand and wait,”

how great shall be the praise and glory for the man who,

through long years, resisted the encroachments of power for the love he bore the people.

In 1816 Mr. Macon, without his solicitation, was transferred to the Senate of the United States and was cordially received with the same respect which had attended his whole public course. He was repeatedly elected president of the Senate until he finally declined the honor further. He was repeatedly tendered positions in the Cabinet, urged to become a candidate for President, and was actually voted for by Virginia for Vice-President, though not a candidate. In 1828, when he was three score and ten years of age, he resigned his offices of Senator, Trustee of the State University, and Justice of the Peace. Twice afterwards he was called from retirement—once to be a member and president of the Constitutional Convention of 1835; and again to be Presidential elector in 1836.

"A calm and steady virtue, which acts temperately and wisely, and never plunges into indiscretion or extravagance is but too often confounded with dullness or frigidity." In these later days there have been those who, blind to the significance of Mr. Macon's life, have failed to see any greatness in the man. A recent North Carolina publication speaks of him as a man of "mediocre abilities and meagre education, a homespun planter, honest and simple, erring more often in his grammar than in his moral principles, but knowing little of the world beyond the borders of North Carolina. No man in American history left a better name than Macon, but the name was all he left." This is not the estimate of his own day nor of the men with whom he moved. I have already spoken of his course at Princeton and his studious habits. In Congress he won speedy recognition and there was no abatement of his prestige with the passing years, but ever increasing

respect. Just before his retirement Randolph wrote of him: "He richly deserves every sentiment of respect and veneration that can be felt for his character." His speeches and writings exhibit familiar acquaintance with both ancient and modern history and full and accurate knowledge of affairs in America. As chairman of the Committee of Foreign affairs of the House of Representatives in that most trying period of the strained relations with Great Britain and France, his course was characterized by that judgment, wisdom, tact, moderation, clearness of perception and knowledge of men and affairs which had distinguished his whole public career, and commanded the respect of patriots in every party. The estimation in which he was held by men of his own time may be shown in a few utterances:

Benton in this Thirty Years View, gives a chapter on the "Retiring of Mr. Macon." He says "I have a pleasure in recalling the recollection of this wise, just and good man, and in writing them down, not without profit I hope, to rising generations. and at least as extending the knowledge of the kind of men to whom we are indebted for our independence and for the form of government which they established for us. Mr. Macon was the real Cincinnati of America, the pride and ornament of my native State, my hereditary friend through four generations, my mentor in the first seven years of my senatorial and the last seven years of his senatorial life.

Jefferson gave repeated evidences of the high esteem in which he held Mr. Macon as a public man by inviting him more than once to a seat in his cabinet, but nothing surpasses a note introducing his grandson, when both men had grown old and were nearing the end of all earthly service. In march 1826 he wrote Mr Macon, "My grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, the bearer of this letter

on a journey to the north will pass two or three days perhaps in Washington. I cannot permit him to do this without presenting him to a friend of so long standing, whom I consider as the strictest of our models of genuine republicanism. Let him be able to say when you are gone, but not forgotten, that he had seen Nathaniel Macon, upon whose tomb will be written '*Ultimus Romanorum!*' I only ask you to give him a hearty shake of the hand, on my account as well as his own, assuring you he merits it as a citizen, to which I will add my unceasing affection for yourself."

John Tyler said "If the minds of Randolph and Macon had been properly blended, they would almost have been a model of absolute perfection—wit, genius and fancy combined with a judgment so inflexible and erect as rarely to have been shaken" and again in 1838, after Mr. Macon's death he said "there was a beautiful consistency in his course, from the moment of his entering public life to the moment of his quitting it. Nothing sordid ever entered into his imagination. He was a devoted patriot whose whole heart and every corner of it was filled with love of country. In the House of Representatives he was the firm and the unflinching Republican, and in the Senate the venerable patriarch, contemporary of Washington and Franklin, and most worthy to have lived in the same century with them." And it was also said of him that "he could say more while getting up out of his chair and sitting down again than most men in a long speech."

These expressions might be multiplied indefinitely, but it is needless—I will let only one other speak—his closest friend and daily companion, John Randolph, of Roanoke. In December 1838, he wrote "There is no one who stands so fair in the public estimation; and with the single exception of General Washington there is not



one of your times who will stand so fair with posterity as yourself," and in his will he says: "To N. Macon I give and bequeath my candlesticks, punch ladle, silver cans, hard metal dishes, choice of four of my best young mares and geldings, and the gold watch with gold chain, and may every blessing attend him, the best, wisest and purest man I ever knew." An honored official of Princeton University wrote me a few days ago: "To say that Macon was of 'mediocre ability and meagre' education is to cast discredit at least on the judgment and discrimination of the State which so honored him." I think the point is well taken.

The suggestion that a *good name* was all he left is not true. He boldly and ably confronted great problems of national life on their political and their moral sides. The truth and integrity of his life, the sincerity of his thought and purpose, the nobility and greatness of his character, have made it easier for every man who has lived since his day to maintain the truth and sound principles.

Mr. Macon died June 29, 1837, at Buck Spring in the county of Warren, in the 79th year of his age, and was buried beside the wife whom he had loved and lost long ago. His spirit has gone to its giver. His memory remains as a benediction to the people of his and our "beloved mother, North Carolina."

In closing I appropriate to him words that were spoken of another: "He who has been enabled, by the force of his talents and the example of his virtues, to identify his own character with the solid interests and happiness of his country; he who has lived long enough to stamp the impression of his own mind upon the age, and has left on record lessons of wisdom for the study and improvement of all posterity; he, I say, has attained all that a

truly good man aims at, and all that a truly great man should aspire to. He has erected a monument to his memory in the hearts of men. Their gratitude will perpetually, though it may be silently, breathe forth his praises; and the voluntary homage paid to his name will speak a language more intelligible and more universal than any epitaph inscribed on Parian marble, or any image wrought out by the cunning hands of sculpture."











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